

## **Festivities for some begin a day later**

**24 December 2001**

**The *Cape Argus* Newspaper– Cape Town, South Africa**

**CHANNING JOSEPH**

**Special Correspondent**

While many South Africans will be tidying up on December 26, the Day of Goodwill, about 20 million African-Americans will only be starting their seven-day Kwanzaa festivities.

The non-religious holiday, which has been celebrated for the past 35 years, was created by Professor Maulana Karenga of California State University at Long Beach. The tradition began as a response to the 1965 race riots in the Watts neighbourhood of Los Angeles, after which many black communities across the United States were left fractured and shaken.

Since then, Karenga's well-meaning attempt to unite and uplift blacks in America has spread to locations as diverse as Britain, Canada, the Caribbean, and even parts of Africa. Kwanzaa's name is taken from the Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza", meaning "first fruits", and is patterned after aspects of African harvest festivals, such as those found among the Ashanti and the Zulu. The celebration emphasises a focus on family togetherness, African cultural heritage and righteous struggle. Its rituals centre on the seven fundamental values of unity, self-determination, co-operation, wealth-sharing, purpose, creativity and faith.

Because the Kwanzaa tradition was initiated so recently, however, there is often a great variety in how each family chooses to celebrate it, although there are a few things that some consider a necessity for any Kwanzaa holiday. For instance, there are almost always colourful African decorations, gift-giving and a straw mat, or "mkeka", on which a special cup, a corn stalk, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and a special candle-holder are placed. The candle-holder, or "kinara", is used during a nightly candle-lighting ritual. For this ceremony, a child from the family is chosen to light one flame each evening.

After this is done, the whole family gathers to discuss one of the seven basic principles of Kwanzaa and what that principle means for their lives. There is also usually a "karamu", or a big traditional meal, served on December 31. In addition to this, some families may tell stories, perform poetry, sing songs, or do traditional African dances.

Despite its recent arrival and wide variation, however, Kwanzaa incorporates a wealth of symbolism and meaning. Each ritual and even each object used for the celebration is a symbol reminding the participants of the principles of Kwanzaa and the holiday's African origins.

On his website, Karenga says: "Kwanzaa brings a cultural message which speaks to the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense."

For more information on Kwanzaa, visit the official site at [www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org](http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org).